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UNCLAS CAIRO 002410

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: ANOTHER CARTOONIST CROSSES THE LINE

REF: CAIRO 2201

1. Summary: A small, middle-of-the-road Cairo weekly magazine ran a cartoon on March 19 of a swastika-covered U.S. soldier. Embassy staff met with the editor on March 23 to protest the cartoon. The editor stated that the cartoon was a 2004 work by a Palestinian freelancer. Although the editor made no specific promise to refrain from using similar images in the future, we believe our timely reaction to the use of such unacceptable symbols sends a message that their use does not go unnoticed and may serve as a disincentive to their use in the future. End summary.

2. Following a series of hostile, anti-U.S. cartoons in Cairo's leading Al Akhbar newspaper last week, including some with Nazi imagery, the much smaller and generally middle-of-the-road Al Ahram Al Arabi weekly magazine (circulation 8,000) on March 19 ran an editorial cartoon of a smiling, swastika-covered U.S. soldier shoveling skulls and bodies labeled "massacres of Faluja, Palestine, Lebanon" into an upturned black top hat, labeled with the Star of David.

3. On March 23, we met with Mohammed Habousha, the managing editor of Al Ahram Al Arabi, to protest the offensive cartoon. Using arguments similar to those used last week by the PA Counselor with the lead cartoonist for Al Akhbar (reftel), post pressed the case that the use of Nazi symbolism associated with the U.S. is both offensive and harmful to a constructive dialogue.

4. Habousha was receptive and explained that the artist who drew the cartoon in question was neither regular staff, nor even Egyptian, but a young, Palestinian freelancer, Ismail El Qassem, from whom the magazine bought some drawings last year. (In fact, the published cartoon carries the date "2004" below the signature.) According to Habousha, his magazine bought some cartoons from El Qassem last year, but did not use them when purchased. Last week, when assembling the March 19 issue, they went to the files to find a cartoon critical of U.S. military presence in the region, and they selected one of El Qassem's.

5. When asked by Embassy staff why such an offensive image was chosen, Habousha claimed that he had not given it much thought and that he had not really focused on the fact that there were swastikas on the soldier's uniform. In fact, he claimed, the drawing was chosen simply to highlight the argument that the U.S. is causing unjustified casualties in the region, and not to accuse American soldiers specifically of Nazi practices. As for the Star of David, he suggested that the artist was only trying to link U.S. violence in the region to Israeli violence in Palestine. When faced with strong rejection of these arguments, Habousha acknowledged that he understood the Embassy's position clearly, but made no specific promise to refrain from publishing similar cartoons in the future.

6. Comment: As with Al Akhbar last week, post is focusing its cartoon-related protests on Nazi imagery associated with the U.S. We believe this approach will lead editors to think twice before using such imagery in future cartoons. Post continues to address the more general, anti-American imagery that routinely appears throughout the Egyptian media in the context of our long-term dialogue with Egypt's editors and journalists. End comment.

GRAY